

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2011-07 **By Michael Blaum, United Kingdom**

This article is brought to you by 'Malt Maniacs'; an international collective of more than two dozen fiercely independent malt whisky aficionados. Since 1997 we have been enjoying and discussing the pleasures of single malt whisky with like-minded whisky lovers from all over the world. In 2010 our community had members from 16 countries; The United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, The U.S.A., Canada, India, Japan, Taiwan, Australia & South Africa. More information on: www.maltmaniacs.org.



Freud Was Right **(about that dram)**

When you say one thing, but mean your mother

I occasionally come across other enthusiasts that begin salivating like Pavlov's dog when their favorite distillery comes out with a new offering. They begin to dram (Freud was right) of a chilly night next to a coal fire, feet on a stool, with a Glencairn heartily cradling that ideal sampling of liquid gold from their ideal distillery. After the bottle is empty, they'll line it up next to the empties of other bottles from that distillery on the shelf or chuck the recycling bin onto a pile of familiar friends. That's right, they've become *the guy who loves 'that' distillery*. Upon discovering these pairings of man and dram, I chuckle inwardly thinking of all the other potential favorites they're missing out on but buying into a brand so readily and early on in their adventures in whisky. As I venture into my whisky stash, still chuckling as smugly as possible, I start seeing a shocking pattern. Wait, why do I have so many bottles from the same distillery? Oh no, it's happened! I can't believe it! What's going on here?

This phenomenon is, of course, not unique to the whisky industry. We see similar trends outside of the drinks industry as well. Some swear by a brand because of a good experience, or at least the perception of durability and quality. But assertions of loyalty are quickly thwarted by a single run-in with a substandard instance of a product (even though it may be a miniscule deviation from the actual quality baseline). The point of this article, however, is not to suggest that good marketing makes up for crappy whisky. There is so much chemistry and character in whisky, and therefore so much that can go wrong with a particular offering. But does a fanatic of a particular brand detach himself from it so freely after a bad experience with one dram? More important, does that person's mind trick them into tasting a better whisky when they know it's their brand?

Hook, line, and sinker

When a distillery (or designated marketing company) is looking to enhance its consumer base, what are the different ways in which they attract those potential brand loyalists? Not being a marketing professional, I don't really have any insight into the formula that makes a brand tick, but you can find some clues if you pay attention. I think all would agree that you drink the whisky, not the label. But then why are all labels not plain, with block lettering like the ever so cleverly branded adult beverage depicted on the right?



Why (besides a change in ownership) did BenRiach change to a label more pleasing to the eyes than their previously plain looking Chivas Bros labels? A trend emerges.



But so far, we've just talked about labels. At the local whisky shop or bar, the label (and price) may be the only liaison between you and the whisky. But what about when your *habit* deems it necessarily to travel to the distillery itself? What's behind the curtain? I certainly can't say I've been to many distilleries for a visit, but I can claim a handful. And this handful ranged from a very modern, corporate-feel operation to a step into the past, with a heritage craft representation.

One example of the latter is The Balvenie. One of the only distilleries that sports its own cooperage and floor maltings, Balvenie certainly wants to project an image of tradition. But is this an artifact of tradition itself, a clever attempt to intrigue those susceptible to such marketing, or a little of both? After all, their floor malting only accounts for 10% of the malted barley they use. They also use wooden washbacks, as opposed to the admittedly more efficient stainless steel option. Does the wood really play a role in the spirit, or is it part of the image (at the expense of a more difficult cleaning cycle)? Do these choices represent a good cost-to-benefit ratio, or is it just a way to claim traditional values? I don't really know the answer, but it's worth posing the question. Then there's The Balvenie label. It is refined, it is elegant, it is clever – but does it make the whisky taste any different? What if, instead of their stylish presentation, the name was instead stenciled in crayon colors as if a child had written them? Would it sell to first time buyers, even on the recommendations of others?

Another example from across the pond is a small, little known distillery in the heart of Iowa. Templeton Rye produces a small batch rye whiskey, which claims its fame through its prohibition-era recipes, made famous by a previously habitual consumer named Al Capone (along with the silent patrons of speakeasies countrywide during that time). Prohibition-era whiskey? This has exclusivity written all over it.



In fact, legal distribution of the whiskey didn't even begin until 2007, enhancing its exclusivity, and further reinforced by its limited number of bottles per batch made available. And if this isn't enough to entice you, their marketing is very well executed. When you think of a product from Iowa, you think of a traditional, heritage craft, much like Amish furniture. And they remind you of this with their

marketing campaigns. That's right, *this IS Iowa whiskey and you should be proud of it when you drink it*. So what's the catch? As opposed to being a small, craft distillery with operations in the small town of Templeton, IA, Templeton Rye is in fact distilled and aged in Lawrenceburg, IN – two states to the east of Iowa. To clarify, all the ingredients do in fact originate in Iowa, they're just shipped 650 miles East to be distilled and aged. The resulting rye whiskey is then shipped back across those 650 miles to Iowa for bottling. Is this truly an Iowa whiskey? Apparently not, but it certainly is clever marketing, tugging away at the emotions of regional pride and exclusivity. The worst part of all of this (being a native Iowan), is that the distaste this marketing leaves in your mouth does not hide the fact that this whiskey is fantastic. It is truly fantastic. So why, then, is this clever marketing campaign necessary? That is the question at hand.

Turning a blind eye

In the end, what does this all mean? People will still claim that you don't drink the label, and you don't drink the brand experience, but I argue that indeed most people do. There certainly is favoritism in the industry with roots in psychology and clever marketing, which turn into *preference*. Is this to say that some people don't genuinely prefer a distillery due to its offerings, a direct result of their distilling and aging process? No, but this type of preference may not be as prevalent as most people think. I could always be wrong ...

If, however, the sentiment in this article is not so unfounded or completely absurd, why is there not a change in the professional whisky review industry? Although there have been claims that Michael Jackson was biased toward Macallan, and Jim Murray is too lenient toward Ardbeg at times, those are purely subjective and arguably irrelevant claims. To identify whether or not psychology and brand preference plays a role in whisky review, why are all reviews not conducted blindly as is practiced at the Malt Maniacs Awards? After the scoring, a reviewer could certainly learn of what the dram actually was and embellish a bit. But what is the value in the reviewers' awareness of the brand and history prior to the tasting? In an industry where many purchases are made on the recommendation of those with expertise, it is perhaps time for a change. I know, I'm preaching to the choir.

In conclusion, in an industry where one producer of a commonly produced spirit must compete against many others, distilleries certainly must find their niche. In other words, there is no value in faulting a company for marketing in a way that sells the product (within respectable limits). But what does this say about the consumer base? Are we really that easily persuaded? Are we drinking labels and absorbing traditions? Are the reviews that we base purchases on truly unbiased? Only you can be the judge. As for me, a good dram of whisky -- regardless of how much psychoanalysis it takes to determine *why* I prefer it – is good enough for me.



Michael, though a casual whisky consumer for a handful of years, only recently began his serious pursuit of knowledge (a.k.a. *single malt street cred*) as an American living in the North of England. An amateur at heart (and in reality), his knowledge base is limited but expanding as he surrounds himself with those Maniacs who've had the whisky bug for some time now. Until that knowledge flourishes, he hopes to continue making observations until someone (other than himself) makes sense out of them. Michael works in IT, and enjoys music, movies, travel, carving wooden spoons, talking in the third person, and spending time with family and friends.